

PHONO PRE-AMPS
Avid Pulsus

The whole, musical truth

Phono pre-amps face a tricky task. They have to receive the often minuscule signal from a phono cartridge (especially if the cartridge is a low-output moving coil design) and then amplify that signal to a level where it can be accepted by the line-level input of a pre-amp.

Vitality, it needs to retain the integrity of that signal, while not injecting any external artefacts – especially noise – to the process. And to make matters worse, the phono stage needs to be able to deal with the idiosyncrasies of individual cartridges, including the often critical resistance loading.

The resurgence of vinyl and its associated hardware has seen a revitalised demand for phono stages, especially since modern integrated amps and pre-amps rarely cater for phono applications – and even more rarely for low-output MC cartridges.

The Avid Pulsus is the second phono stage offered by the UK manufacturer of turntables such as the Diva II, the Volvere and the Acutus. It's effectively a stripped-down version of Avid's high-end Pulsare phono stage, but retains key elements such as extensive configurability and an off-board power supply.

The two-box device consists of a the

main control unit and the power supply, both contained in all-metal casework finished in industrial matt black with white Avid graphics. The control unit offers a pair of gold-plated RCA inputs and an accompanying ground lug, as well as a matching pair of RCA outputs. A dedicated XLR-style socket accepts the juice from the separate power supply.

The underside of the phono stage features a series of jumpers, arranged symmetrically for the left and right channels. These allow gain, resistance and capacitance to be adjusted to ensure close compatibility with any number of cartridges across the moving magnet and moving coil spectrum.

Under the covers, the selected-quality circuit components include top-class capacitors, while the regulated power supply is a key design feature aimed at ensuring very low noise levels.

I ran the Pulsus in conjunction with my Linn LP12/Ittok/Ortofon Cadenza Black record deck, as well as with my Avid Diva II/Origin Live Encounter/Benz Micro Wood L2 deck. A Rega 3/OL1/Ortofon 2M Red combo was used to try out the Pulsus with a MM source.

Run-in time for this phono stage is considerable. Granite Audio's burn-in disc was used

to reduce the burning in period, but even so, it took another 100 hours-plus to settle in, and as I write this, with a total of 200 hours or so, the improvements continue, albeit more subtly.

Getting the Ortofon Cadenza Black to work optimally with the Pulsus took longer than I expected. Ortofon provides little information about the cartridge's resistance and capacitance requirements, and experimenting with the various settings added considerably to the set-up time. Eventually, I settled for a resistance of 300 ohm, and a capacitance of 200 pF.

The Benz Micro ran similar settings, although it seemed to prefer a slightly higher resistance of 500 ohm, and a lower capacitance of 100 pF. The Ortofon 2M Red moving magnet cartridge was a lot less fussy, and was happy running with the standard 47 kohm resistance, and capacitance setting of 500 pF.

Starting with Holly Cole's 'Don't Smoke In Bed', the Pulsus displayed a lively, pacey delivery. This is a phono stage that has plenty of attack. It never allowed the heavy bass passages to sound flabby or overpowering: the sonorous bass guitar snapped and crackled with energy.

Cole's voice was rendered with richness, but never to the point of sounding bloated or over-saturated. Her vocals were allowed



Vital Stats

MM/MCSelectable
GainAdjustable in three steps:
 48/60/70 dB

Output18V RMS (maximum)

ResistanceAdjustable in seven
 steps from 100 ohm to 47 kohm

CapacitanceAdjustable in three
 steps: 100/ 200/ 500 pF

Distortion <0,001%

Noise <81 dB (MM), <67 dB (MC)

RIAA accuracy 5 Hz to 70 kHz

Dimensions (WxDxH)
 120x220x70 mm

Weight 2,7 kg
 (control unit and power supply)

PRICE R13 500

VERDICT

Highly configurable phono stage with a penchant for pace and precision. Great dynamics, and expansive staging. An exciting, top-class unit.

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to soar unfettered above the instruments, the soundstage providing plenty of air and space. The Pulsus always retained its grip on the music, but never let that grip stifle the performance.

The Avid picked up the nuances and details in the music with ease. It facilitated an unencumbered view of the music, with every instrument, every voice, clearly audible and clearly contextualised. By extracting the strong emotional content of the performance, the Pulsus also promoted close involvement with the music.

The phono pre-amp proved to be a good companion for the Ortofon Cadenza Black – it acknowledged the cartridge's revealing treble and deep bass, as well as its penchant for wide open spaces and extremely low noise levels. Talking of which, this is a very quiet phono pre-amp, even though the low signal output meant the EC4.6 pre-amp has to be cranked up quite high.

Moving on to Bob Dylan's 'Together Through Life' double set, the Pulsus treated the rollicking, hillbilly arrangements and Dylan's hoarse, asinine voice with deferent accuracy. Again, it showcased the tremendous tonal range of the Cadenza Black, yet never allowed the big, resonant acoustic bass to dominate – even though it bordered on sounding too boisterous at times.

The Avid achieved excellent stereo focus and paid close attention to fine detail, which made for a powerful, enthralling sound picture. Not only did the instruments sound compelling and real, with almost tangible body and presence, but there was an integrity and a cohesion to the music that made the music seem alive and, well, real. Again, the noise floor was extremely low, adding to the almost visceral quality of the sound.

One of my current favourite LPs is Jeff Beck's 'Emotion and Commotion'. Master guitarist Beck's searing, passionate guitar can cut a sound system to ribbons, but the Pulsus managed to retain the attack and finely honed edge of Beck's playing, while steering clear of any abrasiveness.

His guitar riffs sounded rich and fulfilling, floating above the tight rhythm section

that sounded real enough to walk into, and to shake Jeff by the hand ...

On the Tacet label's 'The Tube Only Night Music', the sublime, tube-only recording of the Polish Chamber Orchestra performing Mozart's 'Eine Kleine Nachtmusik' revealed the Pulsus' ability to make the most of fine, detail.

The silvery violins on this record shimmered exuberantly, while the violas and cellos provided a richly resonant foundation. Again, the phono stage impressed with its nimble, athletic dynamics, its tonal depth, and its ability to place the music on an expansive, open and thoroughly accessible soundstage.

This album also highlighted how dead quiet this phono pre-amp is. The music was vividly etched against a dark, deeply silent backdrop, completely devoid of any electronic artefacts, and thus creating the illusion of being transported right into the heart of the concert hall.

The Avid Pulsus is an accurate, musically truthful phono pre-amp with extensive scope for configurability, ensuring superior compatibility with many different phono cartridges. In sheer performance terms, it's good enough to accompany some fairly serious phono kit, and will delight vinyl lovers with its pace, dynamics, accuracy – and, above all, its musical integrity.

Deon Schoeman

that is percussionist Vinnie Colaiuta and Tal Wilkenfeld on bass. The intricate guitar passages, and the many facets of the instrument Beck manages to extract, were faithfully and compellingly reproduced.

Again, the Pulsus showed off its talent for pace and momentum, as well as a penchant for a grand, open, holographic soundstage

